

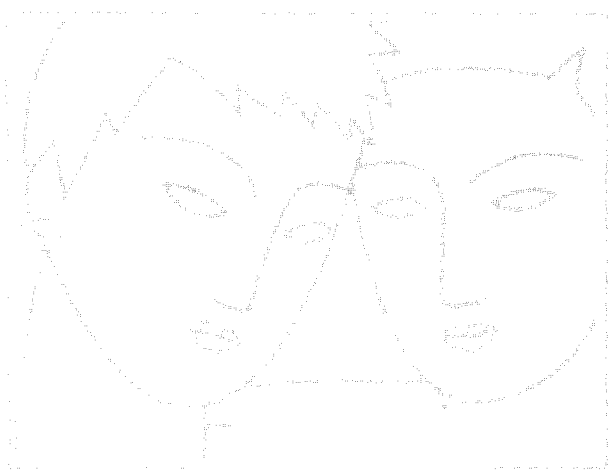
BY THE SAME AUTHOR

After Delores

Girls, Visions and Everything

The Sophie Horowitz Story

PEOPLE IN TROUBLE



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NEW YORK

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It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being,
but their social being that determines their consciousness.

—KARL MARX

A decorative horizontal border at the bottom of the page, composed of many small, identical triangles arranged in a single row.

The cigarette in the mouth of the woman behind the register was cemented with purple lipstick. She had lipstick smeared on her smock. Tiny caterpillars of gray ash decorated the sticky glass countertop.

“You’d better try them on,” the clerk answered with a quick professional assessment. “These are too big for you, miss, and after a certain age you can’t count on growing any more in that direction.”

[illegible]



[illegible]

We New Yorkers always have something else to fear, he told himself, turning up University Place. First it was herpes, this year it's crossfire.

Where he grew up, bowling alleys had always been white stucco boxes with a giant-size pin towering over the parking lot. The bowlers had been divided into two groups; league competitors and amateurs on dates. Anyone could pick out the regulars because they looked so serious. The women had that lacquered

quarters for last. She'd lean back in her chair so they could stare at the coins together. She knew exactly what the stacks could and could not do for her.

After Peter was put to bed, his mother spoke briefly to herself. She'd talk back to a customer, list everything that had gone undone, recall or invent conversation. Then she'd pour a whiskey. He could hear the ice clinking in the kitchen. She'd turn on the radio a shade too low and that was the last sound in his head when Peter fell asleep at night; the murmur of the radio with his mother's occasional duet.

The particular yellow that brought her home from work was the first chapter in his lifetime of light and stayed strong as a memory until he'd finally applied it thirty years later to a small musical uptown. In the third act the hero, having escaped over a prison wall, burst into song. After the last note of the final refrain, the police switched on their ignition, trapping him in the eye of their headlights. It pleased Peter every night to see the convict's expression of fright, hearing the audience gasp, when he knew all along that it was only his mother driving home from work with an apronful of nickels.

Memory, he thought, is part of what light means to me.

The rented bowling shoes matched the pins; white, with red stripes. They smelled of leather and foot sweat and disinfectant spray. They were too big. Peter walked through the place picking up balls as he went along, trying them out. He needed one that was heavy enough, one that had grip.

In the next lane was a teenage girl in tight brown curls who was also bowling alone. He saw her sleepy brown eyes and the moles on her face. She dressed the way girls do who don't realize how beautiful they are because they don't have enough experience in the world to compare. She wore everything so tight he wanted to touch her all over. The name on her scorecard said Shelley. Peter watched her approach. She always turned her wrist at the last minute and each bowl went directly into the gutter.

“Keep your wrists straight,” he said. “And you’ll hit the pins.”

"I don't really care about that," she said. "I'm just wasting time."

"I gotta go," she said. And so she did.

[illegible]

Their home was small, tidy and rent-controlled. They both cooked. Kate was better at it but he left the kitchen cleaner. When she did the wash she'd throw everything jumbled into a drawer. They both swept the floor, but only he mopped it. There was something in Kate's teeth that he still noticed. They were smoother than most and more blue.

Peter had looked closely at many women. Most actresses were light-conscious but not light-sophisticated. They wanted to be in the center of it without realizing how that concentrated visual energy transformed them. Most women had high expectations of pink. They thought it made them rosy and youthful

KATE

[illegible]

At a small table was a red-haired man with a black woman he really liked.

You don't see that so much anymore, Kate noted, remembering when interracial couples were a normal part of Greenwich

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KATE

[illegible]

“You’re using my ideas,” he had complained. “You know there’s no market for my work. No one can hang my work over a fireplace. Pure design challenges capitalism’s view of the object. People always get rewarded for creating commodity products.”

As he was speaking, Kate was looking sympathetically at his face. His lips were swollen and purple with wine as though they had been bruised. His face was covered by a thin slick of oily sweat. After years of being who he was and doing what he did, Peter's gestures had become a list of habitually repeated actions. Had her own as well? Years of the same expressions had turned his body into a collection of these shapes. But there was at the same time something endearing about his stubbornness, about

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his commitment to his art. She saw that he could be a fool or a hero, depending on how he was viewed. It was that quiet observation that had provoked Kate's switch to portraits.

She went straight from the coffee shop to her studio, letting the rain drip down her forehead and along the end of her nose. Without even taking off her coat, she went to a stack of old paintings and flipped through them impatiently. She wanted to smash them. She was tired of standing too far away from a person's face. She wanted to show what she saw making love or in a fight. It was a flash of lip, a pimpled cheek, sweat between the breasts, an unidentified slope or shadow that seemed suddenly more important. Sex and violence were sensual experiences, not visual ones, although they did have a visual component. In order to bring out the touch in the visual she had to get closer, as though her eye was on his chest looking up the side of his neck. That was where she wanted the image to be.

She opened her window wide and leaned out over the ledge, one hand grabbing the molding. The park had been quiet since the summer and was still green. There were thirty or forty makeshift shacks, tents, lean-tos serving as temporary shelter for at least 150 people. But no riots and very little noise from the police. Some stragglers had wrapped themselves in empty garbage bags while others just sat stoned and got soaked. The public bathroom was so overflowing with homeless people trying to stay dry that the crack smokers had to step over them to get inside.

Kate had never been homeless and she had never been hopelessly hungry. She had been mugged a number of times and raped once, years ago. She felt aware of the variety of violence she had both lived and missed and honored them all by clipping resonant images from papers and magazines, then taping them to her walls. There were black-and-whites of young Negro men being bitten by American police dogs. There were colored images of acknowledged heroes lying in swamps of their own blood. She searched each one for the particles of physicality that captured the fear, the pain and especially the willingness of some individual to enter into it. This was one aspect of what she meant by *chaos*. At times the sum of her collection drew such a repulsive conclusion that she couldn't imagine anything worse. But, looking

out her window at the unprotected bodies, she considered that this worse thing was somehow present there.

On the side table by the single bed in her studio, Kate propped up a twenty-five-year-old photo from *Life* magazine. It showed a Buddhist monk who had set himself on fire in Saigon. The photo was one frame but it was all in motion. It caught the man at the point where he was so completely burned that his body crumpled over into the flame and flesh fell off his bones.

Does destroying yourself purposefully make a tangible impact?

What Kate retained from the photo of a collapsing human flame was a flash of light that put its faith in smoke and ashes.

KATE

[illegible]

Kate dialed Molly's number. She loved that she could call up this younger woman and the woman wanted her. It was great.

"I miss you," Kate said into the phone. "I want to get together soon."

Get together was her euphemism for making love.

Then Peter knocked on the door of her studio.

"I have to call you back," she said into the receiver. "Someone's walking in."

Peter wanted to know what he should pick up for dinner.

"I thought I'd get some sausages," he said.

"Okay, but get them at the new Italian place."

"I was thinking about Polish sausage."

“No, too greasy,” she said. “Go to Rocco’s, get some pasta too. I’ll make a sauce.”

“Spinach pasta?” he asked.

"Or ravioli."

Kate's bed had a fluffed feather comforter and matched clean sheets.

I just don't want to hurt his feelings, Kate thought. I love him.

There were dried tulip petals in a bowl surrounded by paint and fresh lilacs, so fragrant by her pillow.

What makes Peter so special is how smart he is, and how committed to his work. I admire that. I want to be able to have that much confidence, to believe so totally in what I am doing.

Peter was too large to sleep with her in that bed. They could make love but they couldn't sleep. Molly and she could sleep together quite comfortably there but they'd never had an entire night. Molly had a double bed at her house but the sheets were not as soft.

Molly had successfully insinuated herself right into the middle of Kate's habit of living and had then started agitating from the inside for change.

"Look," Molly had said. "If you want out, then get out now. If you want in, get in."

Kate knew exactly what Molly was trying to pull. And yet she felt surprisingly vulnerable to these frequent separations with threats of permanency. They pushed her into just enough panic to clarify what would be missing from her life without a girlfriend, without Molly specifically, with only Peter again. Molly had power over her. Molly forced Kate into symbolic concessions like eating dinner with her instead of with Peter and then making it up to him later, or more likely, eating twice. She always did give in eventually, which at first felt begrudging, but she got used to each step toward closeness and wondered if she was in over her head. No, she wasn't. Kate would never grant Molly free access, not in one lump sum and not piece by piece. It would never be that complete a relationship. On this point, Kate was certain.

Her hair was bright orange, naturally, and cut so close to her head that the strands stood up like bristles on a scrub brush. It was a buzz cut, exactly the kind Peter had worn as a little boy. She had seen it most recently on teenage girls and liked it in the

New Yorkers were not familiar with red hair. They didn't know how it worked. All they ever lived with was thick curly brown or straight black. Everything else was exotic. Red hair, blue eyes and red lips in New York made Kate a perpetual outsider except on Saint Patrick's Day. Old Jewish ladies stopped talking when she walked into the room. People always gave her directions even though she'd known where she was going for over twenty years.

"I always knew I would get to a woman eventually," she had confided to Spiros, sitting over coffee one late afternoon in the back of his gallery. "But I could never picture precisely how. I couldn't imagine growing apart from Peter or any of the horrible scenes that would have to take place to separate us."

"No," she said. "There is a silent tolerance."

"If she will allow it."

“With Molly so many things could go wrong. She’d get bored or want to eat me up. She wouldn’t leave me any free time. She’d trap me, try to turn me into a lesbian. I wouldn’t be able to do my artwork if I was with her.”

“Why not?”

"Because . . . she's not intellectual enough."

"Well then, it is clear," he said. "Good to be sure about that."

“Why?”

“Because, Kate. If you are going to invest in the past you’d better end up choosing the past. If you give priority to the past,

Kate looked down at her toes. They were clean. Her toenails were trimmed. The hair was red around her ankles, so light it didn't need to be shaved. Her eyelashes were pale orange, like an evening sun, and long enough to dust her face. She always kept the hair under her arms clipped with a small scissor hanging

over the sink for that purpose. She and Peter looked good together aesthetically.

He was sweet from the first time they met. At that time he was a girl. His face was smooth, anyway, for a man, but Kate used to dress him up in girl's clothing. She'd put him in panties. They'd laugh and he'd prance around twisting his hips like a fag. She'd put her fingers on the lace and feel his dick underneath. He was not afraid to dress that way. He knew who he was. He was a girl.

"Peter's such a girl," Kate would say to Molly every now and then.

“What do you mean?”

"He's a baby. He's passive. He whines and can't take care of himself. He never carries the heaviest thing."

“That’s not like a girl,” Molly said, that annoyed tone in her voice. “That sounds exactly like a man to me. I hate when you say things like that. You’re not thinking for yourself. You’re just repeating something you heard. Just because Peter isn’t brutal doesn’t automatically make him a hero, you know.”

"What are you talking about?"

Kate thought about something else then. She had no intention of engaging this kind of thinking. She thought about some other different thing.

“How come you never had children?” Molly had asked her one afternoon as they were kissing by the water in East River Park.

It had to do with her family, but it seemed like too much to go into right then.

"I had one of those families," Kate said, looking for an entertaining detail that would explain them without too much effort, "where we all had first names beginning with the same letter. Kathleen, that's me, Kelly, Kevin, Kerry was my sister who died, and Keith. We had pillow fights and breakfasts and went to Latin mass on Sundays. My mother was a dentist. The only time she ever touched us was when she worked on our teeth. My dad was more fun, a drinker, a businessman, a little more intimate."

"Doesn't sound too bad."

“No, Molly, it wasn’t bad, it’s just that I grew up in America

“Kate, take my earrings out for me, will you? I don’t feel like doing it for myself.”

“What are you thinking about?” Molly asked.

"Thinking about you."

"What about?"

"That you are becoming more real to me."

“Good,” Molly said, holding her, holding her head against Kate’s chest, so girly and soft. “Now I don’t have to be your child anymore. From now on I’ll be your mistress.”

It didn't feel like a threat.

P E T R

All summer, every single person had been uncomfortable. It was not unusual for the city to smell of baking garbage and decomposing bodies. But most New Yorkers found a point each season when they begrudgingly accepted the heat. They no longer tried to defy it. They picked out the air-conditioned subway cars, knew which banks to stop in to cool off between the subway and work. They slowed down their pace of accomplishment in order to accommodate it. But this summer had been different. There had been a suffocating brutality that seemed brand-new. It was the absolute lack of relief that put each person into a private state of wondering if it would ever get cool again. This year Peter noticed that the air had stayed so warm there was a creeping sensation of melting polar ice caps and a lot of speculation about the greenhouse effect as seasons came to an end as a concept.

Peter was past forty and intended to live as long as possible. He took care of his body, but more importantly, he had developed

cent deposit. The river smelled of abandoned cars, old fish and stale beer. Peter turned up East River Park, under the Manhattan Bridge, and jogged slowly back over to the West Side. That morning, everything had been white; his T-shirt, his jock, shorts, socks and running shoes. Now they were soaked in his sweat and covered in the city's filth. He was happy. He was a dirty, sweaty man.

He stopped in a restaurant for an iced tea, and leaned back in the booth, feeling his blood pulse. At the next table were two young men, overdressed in fashionable new wave suits and short haircuts showing clean necks with equally pristine ties.

“Look, you stop talking about Rick and I’ll stop talking about the goddamn cat.”

Peter watched them whine like two suburban matrons. He hated to see men act like that. No, he corrected himself, he hated when anyone acted like that. A third man joined them then, just as overdressed and just as slight. Peter noticed that his own chest was twice the size of theirs.

"There you are, did you find them?"

“Yes I did,” the newcomer snapped, tired and annoyed. “Here you go.”

He dumped a pile of black ribbons onto the table, then picked out one to wrap around his upper arm, finally extending it for a companion to fasten.

"I tried to tie it on myself," he said. "But I couldn't get the ribbon to lie flat. Will you pin it?"

“Private sector,” he said. “That’s the future. The whole city should be run by businessmen. I could do a much better job with the prison system than any government official. I’d love to buy the prison system and show New York how to treat its criminals.

could tell from the pained expression she tried to hide. She was sour sometimes, with a particular distaste that only comes from longing for a lover. He was honestly curious to hear the details, to know the scenario of their fight and separation, to comfort her. But after having fully imagined Kate's tearful confidence about her lost girlfriend, he realized that such an event would reduce his stature in her eyes to that of friend or brother and not the husband he was determined to be. It was better to wait patiently for Molly to simply disappear. Then Peter decided to go into the church.

The huge marbled ceilings made it cooler inside. It was cool but the air was still. Peter stayed in the back because he was a tourist, and had learned from traveling in Mexico that when you are watching another culture in church it is best to stand in the back. There was music coming from the balcony but it wasn't the organ he had expected. Instead a harpsichord was being played. Perhaps the dead man had been a harpsichord fan. Peter guessed that homosexuals were probably as creative with their funerals as they were with everything else. But after a while he found the instrument's tone annoying. Pounding was half the sound and much too abrasive for a funeral. He inhaled the incense and felt again how still the air was. It barely circulated. The smell was beginning to be overpowering, stifling actually. Peter felt faint and sat down abruptly in the nearest pew. Even though he tried repeatedly to relax, he just couldn't breathe. His lungs would not fill with air, so he left as quietly and respectfully as he had come, stepping back into an almost oppressive heat, only able to take a full deep breath a few blocks away.

When he got back to the apartment late that afternoon, Kate had just returned from the studio and had brought home her coveralls to be washed. They were laid out over the dresser next to a bag of groceries that hadn't been put away. She had started changing into more attractive clothing but had gotten waylaid by something real or imagined and seemed halfway about everything. As Peter watched her, he noticed with a quiet sadness how Kate could be euphoric or depressed for no visible reason. All week she'd been irritable, waiting for something, or teary-eyed and deeply regretful. He had actually caught her a few times

staring out the window as she was doing at this moment. He stood watching her. The muted sunlight brought out only the surface texture of her face and so he saw every wrinkle and crack in the skin. He saw how her hair would look when it turned white and her features, how they would fall. Then, in one calm and graceful motion, she turned her eyes like the girl in the Vermeer painting being interrupted at her music lesson. The slight twist of her neck and the engagement of her eyes presented themselves with a candor that was always flirtatious. Now that her affair was over and had clearly ended badly, Peter knew that only he could make her happy again.

MOLLY

Molly was glad her bed was warm and the night hot because she carried with her a faint but present desire to masturbate to Kate. She thought to her as if it were a gift, but she actually meant to masturbate to a memory of making love with her like one moves to a piece of music.

She was in a hallucinatory state. It was too hot and her body could not get cool. Each part of her was sore and had a distinct odor. When Kate said "I love you," its effects lingered on Molly's skin like radiation. Molly could sail out the window on the strength of that alone. She could fly out into the sky that was always between her apartment and Kate's like an ocean of buildings instead of barnacles. When Molly sat on the bed and looked out the window she could just make out the shadow of terra cotta surrounding Kate's rooftop.

"I want to be a good lover to you," Molly said to the gray-

red funnels and chimneys, the slanted collapsing mountains that formed the boundaries of their pleasureland.

“But I want you to be a good lover to me as well. I want this to be reciprocal.”

Molly lived with this conflict like an itch, like mites laying eggs under the skin that made her squirm with discomfort, especially at night, when she, without restraint, relived those moments of pure anger. Like waiting for Kate. She seemed to always be waiting, the afternoon getting longer and later until it disappeared into that other time. Then a figure would appear, finally, on the stairs preceded by huge flowers. Molly was immediately reduced to some businessman's daughter whose daddy tried to replace a forgotten birthday with a gift too large and obvious to have any meaning.

“I couldn’t leave on time because Peter was hanging around. I would have had to say where I was going.”

"You should have told him you had an appointment with me and had to leave."

At the same time that she spoke, Molly thought about having to watch those flowers wilt and crumble all over the floor before Kate came back to her again.

Maybe someday she'll come while the last bunch is still fresh, Molly thought. *If she does that, I'll sprinkle the petals on her chest.*

She dialed Kate's number. The phone rang. It rang again and Molly decided not to hang up because she liked knowing the room it was ringing in, having memories in that room. But after a dream that lasted five rings she heard the click that announced the presence of an answering machine, to be followed one breath later by a greeting, perhaps accompanied by music. That was new. Kate had bought an answering machine for her studio. Who wanted to come home to messages? Molly had long ago decided that buying an answering machine would be a public admission of a private sin; waiting for women to call her. It made her rush home from work to sit next to the phone, refusing even to go out for a newspaper. Phone machines were an announcement to the world that a person wanted more calls than they were getting. They thought there was actually more attention out there trying

A decorative border consisting of a continuous sequence of small, identical triangles pointing upwards.

The second time Molly saw her she was naked in the locker room of a neighborhood pool. Her eyes came up to Kate's breasts, which were small with no weight. Kate's nipples and her lips were the same color, a pale peach, like tiger lilies. Almost every

[illegible][illegible]

name of someone she had known peripherally and hadn't even realized was sick.

By the time they got to the river many of the marchers were dripping sweat from their necks. Drops were sliding down their temples. Everyone stopped then and was even more quiet than before. Each person looked at the water, how dirty it was, how much garbage was floating in it. They looked across to the Jersey side, at the high rises in Fort Lee and the polluted mess that made up the rest of it. Each one had a very private thought about a person who had died or about themselves or about New Jersey or why they weren't feeling anything right then. It was the calmest state of confusion that Molly had ever been in. Then somebody started to sing. When that man made the first sound he startled the other mourners, who felt interrupted. But after the second note every single person who had come to the AIDS vigil realized that the man was singing "somewhere over the rainbow." Another man let his balloons fly off over the water and one by one as they were singing "somewhere over the rainbow," other people let their balloons fly away. Molly looked out at the water and the reddish industrial-waste sunset and thought two thoughts. She watched the balloons rising toward the filthy sky and thought, *They leave your hand the way they leave your life.* She could only really see the sea of them after losing sight of her own. Then she thought, *bluish carmine, velvety.*

What does it mean to sing “somewhere over the rainbow” and release balloons? It made her feel something very human; a kind of nostalgia with public sadness and the sharing of emotions. But then what?

To a certain extent she had gotten used to hearing about people dying. She hadn't gotten used to seeing it, but now when someone said, "I couldn't call you back because a friend of mine died," it was said calmly.

This dying had been going on for a long time already. So long, in fact, that there were people alive who didn't remember life before AIDS. And for Molly it had made all her relations with men more deliberate and detailed. First, the men changed. They were more vulnerable and open and needed to talk. So she

The shirts were angry but the men were smiling. The older one was black. He wore his hair in a large natural like Angela Davis used to do, which made him look distinctly old-fashioned. No one wore their hair that way anymore. It was either clean-cut or Grace Jones or dreadlocks. But this guy reminded Molly immediately of those posters of Huey P. Newton sitting on a throne holding machine guns. Only this man wasn't wearing a black beret and leather jacket. Instead he had on effeminate floral-print three-quarter pants like girls buy on Fourteenth Street. He had a gold loop and a ruby stud in one ear and a feather in the other. He was swish. He was an older black gay man who called other men "darling" and "girlfriend." On the center of each flower printed on his pants was the word *love*.

The second man was much younger and taller and white. He had a long ponytail and good teeth. Then Molly got off the car and took a leaflet.

That people are dying and the government does nothing? If you do not think that this is right then do something about it.

The flyer went on to invite people to a weekly meeting. Molly folded it four times and pushed it into her pocket. She missed Kate very much. She wished Kate were there. Molly walked home feeling open and vulnerable and then very angry with an energy that had nowhere to go.

KATF

She hadn't heard from Molly in three weeks but the memory tapes were replaying in the waiting room. Kate turned on the radio in her studio hoping for something diversionary to sing along with. After flipping the dials back and forth without success she returned to her table and tore the drawing in half. Then she held both pieces next to each other as though they followed in sequence instead of being two components of the same movement. It was a simple pencil sketch of a woman's face. She had seen the woman come out of the movie theater that afternoon, when Kate stood across the street watching Molly tear tickets. This woman had huge lips. She decorated them with a metallic pink like the Formica in Los Angeles kitchens. She had eyes the shape of olives and straight black hair. By taking her depiction of those lips and placing them next to, instead of underneath, the eyes, Kate was forced to confront the mouth first, to make a relationship with it before discovering those oil-cured black things. The order changed the effect because, after seeing the

“Census,” he said, smiling.

“Hello, I’m conducting a survey on tenant perceptions.”

"I'm with the Tenant Survey Organization."

"Okay," Kate said, not wanting to be excessively paranoid.

“Twenty-two.”

“How do you define family?”

"I don't know," she said.

“Three. Why are you asking?”

He looked at her as though that question were perfectly standard.

“Please, two more questions and it will be complete. I only get paid for a complete questionnaire.”

“How many single men?”

“How many narcotics abusers?”

"So has New York City," he said smiling. "But you wouldn't w. You're from out of town."

She closed the door again. Just then the intercom buzzed. Only this time it buzzed twice.

[illegible]

Their reunion unfolded thusly. Each one made her stand and stated her case. Then they back-and-forthed it for a while. Then they embraced.

“I only have two primary emotions,” Molly said. “Anger and sexual desire. Then I have two secondary emotions: fondness and poignancy.”

“Which ones apply to me?”

"Kate, toward you I feel anger and sexual desire, fondness and poignancy."

They let themselves feel each other and transform in each other's bodies before fighting a little bit and then they relaxed. This was the transition from life into love.

They took off their clothes and rolled naked against each other on their feet and leaned on a wall the color of starlight. After various places on each other's bodies and a variety of tem-

was doing she was always so many colors. Then she watched her dance.

At first Kate seemed nervous, self-conscious, not free within her body, but encouraged by Molly's absolute joy, she relaxed and gave her lover this pleasure more freely.

Molly leaned back against the bed, hearing the sounds of day coming from the street, but sitting in the artificial evening.

When a person dances for her lover, Molly thought, she may want to dance sexy and close or just want to move. Both are great. Neither requires permission.

That's when the phone rang.

The two women watched each other's eyes, very still as the machine picked it up and the message played. Then the voice came on. Kate went to the machine.

"Hello, Peter?"

She turned her back, not so much for privacy as for concentration. There was nowhere to go in the tiny studio, so Molly sat very quietly in the chair with her eyes closed. Kate was going to take her time and not alert Peter to any other consideration. It was to be a normal conversation. They talked details. All details. The contents of that day's *Times*, including which airlines had proposed merger. The plight of the American farmer. Something having to do with percentage points. Both Kate and Peter clearly believed in quoting statistics. Molly moved to the bed, it was so clean and soft.

I really should get organized enough to have clean and soft matching sheets, she thought. She looked through the books on Kate's shelf. Any distraction.

Thank God, Molly thought as Kate and Peter finally got to the op-ed page. *I'd so much rather be the lover sitting here in silence than the husband being lied to on the phone.*

When she hung up, Kate took off her dress and placed it carefully on a hanger. Then she came to lie next to Molly and held her breasts in her hands.

“What’s this?” Kate said, finding an extra texture between Molly’s legs.

"Take a look."

Molly watched Kate's face framed by Molly's legs, one cheek

Peter examined himself in the window of Tiffany's. He was in no rush. There was plenty of time until he had to be at the theater by five. He could run uptown and down again by then and still have an hour to check up on things. He had to be constantly vigilant with technicians to ensure the designs were completed with perfect accuracy. Every instrument must be precisely focused or the lighting would have no soul. It would be muddy, not crisp. Sometimes muddy is the best choice, of course, but it must be chosen. Whenever he worked a show with dubious structure, like this one, he could correct the shape without anyone ever suspecting. When an actor crossed the stage for no reason, Peter could give him a light to step into, which was at least an illusion of meaning. That's what it was to build shape. Technicians were grunts for the most part. If they could be artists they would have been. So they didn't care as much as they should

in various languages and constant movement as people came and went from their pews. After all, this cathedral was a major tourist attraction. This wasn't some quiet neighborhood church.

Peter made wishes. He always made the same ones, in the same order. He had kept those wishes in that order for years and years. He wanted to do good work, have it be recognized and stay healthy. Kate should stay healthy too. These didn't seem to be outrageous demands. And he wanted to be loved. As he was reciting his own private liturgy, about forty men stood up together from among the worshipers and turned to face them. These forty men turned their backs to the pulpit while the service was in progress. Peter's eyes happened to focus on the face of one who seemed somewhat familiar. Perhaps he lived in the same neighborhood. The man was thin and unsure of what he was doing. He was lanky and older with a gray mustache and bushy gray hair. He was uncomfortable. The man wore a black T-shirt with a pink triangle and the word *Justice* across his chest. It did not make him look like Superman. He was an anxious, regular guy. All the men had the same shirts. Some were robust and effeminate. Some were shy. They were all strong-willed and very serious. The men stood with their backs to the priest who continued his service as though nothing was happening. One of them held up a sign that said *Living with AIDS for Two Years and Five Months—No Time for Red Tape.*

These are men with AIDS, Peter realized. Forty of them. But that one doesn't look like he has it. He looks like he works out. The thin one has definitely got it.

He took another look at the familiar one and decided that he had definitely seen him somewhere before and that that guy probably didn't have it.

That black man, thought Peter. I wonder if he's gay or if he got it from drugs.

Then the black man spoke.

“The church is the world’s most powerful hypocrite,” he said. Peter noted that the man’s voice and gestures were campy.

They shouldn't have let him be the spokesman, Peter thought. They should have picked somebody more masculine, so people would be more sympathetic.

The man kept speaking.

“Why don’t all you gay priests and nuns come out and get the church off the backs of your brothers and sisters? Stop spending poor people’s money trying to take away everyone’s sexuality. Spend it on affirmative care for people with AIDS.”

The crowd behaved pretty well. All these months of media blitz had prepared them in some way for this moment. A flurry of simultaneous translation into a variety of languages subsided once the audience was fully informed as to the content of that man's speech. Some of the visitors murmured with disapproval, others with compassion. Some looked like they wished they hadn't brought their children. Some tourists brushed it off as one of those "typical New York experiences" they'd heard so much about, then prided themselves on actually encountering. Some took pictures with flash. The men stood quietly, the worshipers sat quietly and the only noise was the voice of the priest droning over the sound system as though these men were nothing, as though they were not there. Then the mass was over and the men filed out. Peter decided to be natural and went to the front steps trying not to express any opinion to anyone who might be looking at him. It was a windy day, suddenly, for the first time all season. Some of the men were cold because they had not thought to bring sweaters. They stood around not knowing what to do for the rest of the afternoon. The ones who were used to being sick always carried sweaters, which they put on over their T-shirts. Then they dispersed, quickly. Some went off to have coffee, others went home to rest. Once those shirts were covered, they stopped looking like gay men with AIDS. They looked just like everyone else.

That, thought Peter, is their most effective trick.

[illegible]

Peter's new intern was waiting for him inside the theater. He had been working all day but was wearing a suit and tie. Every time he climbed up the ladder, the intern carefully took off his jacket, unbuttoned his sleeves, folded them twice up his forearm and then climbed. When he came down again he put his clothing back in order immediately. He was a short black man named Robert who had just graduated from Yale Drama School

and was assigned to Peter by the playwright, who was an old college buddy of Robert's father. Something about him annoyed Peter deeply. He was organized, true, but he was businesslike, that was his problem. He looked like a stockbroker, not an artist. Robert carried a briefcase. He never opened it balanced on one knee. He always laid it down deliberately on a flat surface and snapped the metal clasps so that they clicked and popped at the same time. He had been one of five black students in his prep school and one of five black students in his program at Yale.

He moved similarly to Peter, like a man who knew he could have been in finance but chose something more dangerous and obscure. But his briefcase reflected those other options a bit too blatantly for Peter's tastes. Inside it were little compartments for tools and a tape measure. He had smaller cases to hold his brand-new stencils for drawing leikos and Fresnels. At Yale he had learned up-to-the-minute technology for the various applications of mechanized light.

"I supervised the put-in," he said. "And I programmed the cues."

"I hate computers," Peter said trying to be personal. "I've refused to learn how to use them. It is a lot more interesting to try to run a show by candle or flashlight than to push one button and have everything done by computer."

Robert sharpened his pencil.

"Okay," he said, meaning nothing. "Let's run the cues."

Then he carefully removed his jacket and draped it over the back of his chair, folding his sleeves up his brown forearms. He had clearly been one of those kids who wore suits to school. A kid who was most comfortable in a jacket.

"Okay," Peter said. "The audience has come in and taken their seats. So, flick the houselights and then, take them down."

"They don't flick," Robert said. "They are not programmed to flick. They can go bright or dim, on or off, but not both."

Peter couldn't imagine what to say. He felt very tired suddenly. He felt older than he'd ever felt in his whole life. His role was becoming obsolete. He was being replaced by something with a level of information and ability that was not higher than his.

"Do you know how to make lights out of coffee cans?" he

from Top Forty to country. He didn't know one song. He had never heard of any of the groups. He put his hand up flat against the right side of his face and thought for one fleeting second that he had turned into a very silly man. He flipped to the jazz station and listened to that for a while. Then he went home.

When Kate came back from the studio that night she asked what he'd done all day.

"I listened to jazz and worked on a show," he said. "Working on a show" was the perfect way to explain away any block of time. Then he raised his eyes to hers and saw that she had that look. She had on her sunglasses and her scarf and too much lipstick and a big smile with lots of "yeah"s so he knew that she also had a secret because she was being much too polite.

KATE

[illegible]

During the many months of late-night walks home from Molly's Kate had often wondered, *Have there always been so many?*

There was a huge black market on Second Avenue every night after eleven between Saint Mark's Place and Seventh Street. You could buy anything. There were people selling hot ten-speed bikes for thirty dollars and hot three-speed bikes for fifteen. There were crates of brand-new tape recorders and cassettes and CDs with cellophane still around them. But there were also entire contents of various people's ripped-off homes that were pulled

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"No."

Kate didn't know what else to say. She got dressed while Molly sat there, naked, watching her. That became a ritual between them. Kate kept her eyes on Molly's eyes until her own breasts and genitals were covered, then she'd switch her gaze to the door.

"Red silk," she had said, walking out the door. "Your back is so white."

Kate got to the front of her apartment building and looked up. The light was out. Peter was asleep. She felt filled with energy then. She wanted to run everywhere. She didn't want to go upstairs and lie still in a black house. On impulse she turned sharply and almost bolted toward her studio. Then she regretted the decision. Then she accepted it and started walking.

Now he'll think I've finally stayed out all night with her and won't believe me when I say I've been working. But it will be completely true.

This was such a complicated game of truth or dare. Peter forced her to lie to him in some ways and made her tell the truth in others. There were ways he wanted to be lied to, like about how much the two women saw each other and how important it had all become. But he wanted the truth when it came to the fact of Molly's existence. He wanted to hear about a meaningless affair with an unknown woman. Funny at first, the fact that it was a woman threw them both off guard. She didn't panic and neither did he, because they didn't expect that to mean anything. It just snuck up on both of them. If it had been a man it never would have gotten this far. Neither Pete nor Kate would have let it happen. Now Peter wanted to know everything and never see any of it. Kate was left with the responsibility of finding some acrobatic technique for accomplishing this unspoken request.

The first night Kate and Molly spent together, she'd walked home wondering, seriously, how Peter could have possibly committed himself to a lifetime of making love to a woman with such small breasts. The next time she and Pete had sex she was bursting with curiosity about this and many other questions pertaining to a man's view. She had rubbed her nipples in his face, like

"That's the problem with having friends," she said. "You have to watch them suffer and die."

Jeffrey Rechtschaffen 1960–1988. She was in a great rage. She was so angry, clicking her jaw, uttering a variety of obscenities. She spoke them with such a fury that a crease appeared between her eyes in the morning and by that afternoon it was deeply embedded. She didn't know what day it was. She didn't look both ways crossing the street. She didn't think to button her jacket against the December wind. All she knew was anger. She alternately burned and tightened on the way to the bus station to pick up Pearl, who had come down for the funeral. Thank God for Pearl. Pearl let her know she belonged to someone.

She couldn't call Kate because they had just seen each other and she was supposed to wait for Kate to call her. More accurately Molly just couldn't face "There's someone here, I can't talk," one

[illegible]

Kate took off all her clothes and stood in front of the mirror. She moved her head until she got the best angle: chin down, eyes wide, slightly angelic. Then she pulled the loose skin away from her eyes and opened the window. Her neck was getting veiny but it was either that or the beginnings of an extra thickness around the waist. She stood back from the glass and viewed her entire self. That body had become her pleasure dome, every act of it. She was doing something powerful. She was completing her sexuality. Her love for men was still intact but then there was this other set of relations.

Kate wandered around the studio touching her own objects. She tightened the glue, moved her charcoals over by the window. Kate gathered her sponges and dumped them into the sink. She washed her hands then, still naked, and picked up the magazine Molly had given her. She caught herself in the mirror again and then opened the magazine. Molly had handed it to her one late

“Isn’t what great?”

“That a straight woman like Susan can feel comfortable coming to a place like this.”

“Why didn’t you introduce me? By the way, she’s not straight.”

"Of course she is. I know her husband."

“She knows yours. Kate, look at the way she moves through the crowd. See how she touches the women as she moves past them and smiles sweetly. Watch. I’ll bet you anything that’s her girlfriend.”

“Which one?”

“That femmy girl with the great earrings. See, wait, yep, watch that smooch. She came here to meet her lover.”

Kate stared at the door for a minute and then drank down her four-dollar beer.

“But I know her husband.”

“You think you’re the only closeted married woman in New York City?”

"I am not closeted."

“Okay.”

“How weird about Susan,” Kate said. “It makes me feel like I don’t really know her. Like I don’t have any idea of who she is.”

Molly didn't say a word.

“This is Kelly’s,” Molly told her, bringing them to a remodeled overpriced bar across Seventh Avenue. “It used to be exclusively for jocks. But since the renovation it got taken over by collegiate dyklings. Everyone here is femme.”

"How can you tell who's femme?"

“That’s the question of the year. After a while you just know. Usually it’s the one who puts her arms around the other woman’s shoulders when they’re dancing.”

"Which one of us is femme?"

“Neither. That’s a joke. It’s too early to tell because you still act straight. You have to be out a little longer before these subtle nuances take shape.”

“Why are you always telling me what I’m going to become and what I’m going to think? How do you know?”

"You can bitch at me now, but later you'll see."

This time Kate kept silent.

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MOLLY

[illegible]

Pearl and Molly walked toward the church in Chelsea where so many men who had died of AIDS had their funerals. It was one of the first places to open their business to people with AIDS and their lovers. So it had become a safe environment for these most private of events.

The women were not talking about Jeffrey and they were not talking about AIDS. They had said everything they needed to say. All the rest would have been repetition because, after a point, there really was no way to resolve any of this. They had made love and cried and woken up together and lain about and eaten breakfast and talked about Jeffrey and gotten dressed.

Coming out the front door, Molly saw a short, husky black man waiting for her on the sidewalk. He was not leaning against the brick or sitting on the steps. He was jumping up and down instead, trying to keep warm.

"Molly, hey you got any checks for me?"

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so. But she was a better man than most because she was so strikingly handsome in her black suit. She strode powerful and erect like a well-bred charming man. A male model perhaps. A movie star. She didn't wear a white button-down. She was much too stylish for that. Kate, the man, wore a soft blue shirt designed for a sexy strong man's leisure. It was cut to hang from his neck and muscles. Kate was thrilling. She was the most handsome man on the street.

"Molly?" Pearl asked, not moving at all.

“What?”

“Do you fully understand what you’re dealing with here?”

“No,” Molly said, starting to walk again and then stopping one more time to take a hard last look. “I have no idea.”

They turned away from each other for a moment again and scanned, once again, the faces in the crowd just to see if Mario was there.

“Hey, Bob,” she asked, pulling on his beaded belt, which came up to her chin. “Who is the guy standing over there in the corner?”

It was the same man she had seen handing out pamphlets at the vigil in early fall. And he was still just as femme. His brown skin shone against a pink wool suit, and she saw at least six rings through his left ear. He was involved in a serious, quiet discussion with three other men, one of whom was the surfer with the brown ponytail, who comfortably held the black man's hand.

“That’s James Carroll. The hunk on his left is his lover Scott. They’re very old friends. Do you know them? They’re extraordinary. James in particular is a very clear and passionate man.”

Bob said “passionate” with an emphasis on the *p* that brought out his Baptist roots and made him sound like the preacher man in a tiny white church in the middle of nothing but pasture.

"I got a flyer from him at the AIDS vigil. What's that group he's working with?"

"I'll tell you, Molly dear. There are not many choices right at the moment. If you are discreet you will know exactly what I am telling you now. There are a number of wonderful men who have absolutely nothing to lose. James is taking a sow's ear full of bitterness and transforming it into a silk purse."

The music started then as the gathering filed into the chapel.

Jeffrey had planned his own funeral and so it started with Nina Simone wanting to know what being free would feel like. The whole service was just like Jeff, sentimental, deliberate and goofy. There was a rainbow gay liberation flag draped over his coffin and fresh strawberries and figs for everyone to eat. There were silly pictures of him pasted up on the walls so people could walk around remembering this or that. Then different friends spoke about little things; his recipe for strudel, the time he dyed his hair blue, how badly he played the clarinet. They read aloud from some of his early newspaper articles against the closing of

KATE

[illegible]

He had already finished half a bottle of wine by the time Kate got to the restaurant. She knew it would take two more halves before any real negotiating could begin.

He was her dealer and so she had to trust him and absolutely could not afford to do so because after all, as Peter always pointed out, Spiros was not an artist. The most reassuring fact that she kept in her head at all times was that the only way he could make money was if she did too. Otherwise it was like being with Daddy again, intimate insecurity.

"I'm going out for a walk."

She didn't say anything. Not "Can I come?" and not "Where are you going?"

We still have sex, he thought. So what's the problem? Is Kate old enough for menopause?

"Peter?"

“Uh-huh?”

“I’m having dreams in the middle of the day.”

Finally, he thought with relief.

Peter went and sat down behind Kate on the couch. They liked to sit that way together, where he stretched out behind her and became just another cushion to sink back into.

“Human furniture,” she said with a sigh of relief. This is what she always said when he did that for her. They could be normal. He could comfort her now as always. Nothing was going to change that.

“In my last dream I was going to Vietnam as a tourist. I forgot to bring my guidebook. I was sitting on the airplane, panicking. I thought, *This is what you get. How stupid worrying about a guidebook when people don't have enough to eat. This wasn't war-torn Vietnam, this was the modern Communist one. They don't care about your dollars here, I told myself. You fool, there are no tourist attractions in a people's republic. Things we take for granted like airport signs translated into English are just details of capitalism. You know?*”

This wasn't exactly what Peter had expected. He wanted something about fear, or her family. He wanted her to say, "Peter, I love you so much. I don't want anything to ever come between us."

He wanted something tender where he could be strong for her, not dreams about Ho Chi Minh City. She seemed older every time he looked at her. She was not staying in as good shape as he was. She wasn't sleeping enough and she wasn't working out. There was no way Kate could make it through the whole winter without getting sick.

“Are you eating enough, Katie? There’s chicken in the fridge. Have you had any?”

"Yes," she lied. Then seemed to regret that. He reached over and touched her. He started to rub her neck.

“Not that way. Just normal flu or something. Have a good walk. Bring me back some magazines.”

"Peter?"

That's how they always were, calling each other back. Their hands were always in each other's pockets.

“If you hadn’t had this life, what do you think you’d be doing now?”

"I'd be a dad," he said without any doubt. "Maybe teach school in New England. Make things in the basement after work. Coach Little League. Be an upstanding citizen."

"I could have been a housewife," she said. "An alcoholic one. Or a frigid professional. I probably would have been an art teacher in an elementary school having a twenty-year affair with the married science teacher, ignoring the janitor's advances and watching the legs of the twelve-year-old girls. What else do weird women do when they find themselves in normal places? I could have opened the Kathleen Connell Dance Academy on Main Street and put on *The Nutcracker Suite* every Christmas in the basement of the Calvary Church. I'd do my food shopping in a beige leotard and ballet slippers. Or, I could have been a whore at the Sly Fox Café in Covington, Kentucky. But with any of those possibilities I'd still end up going out in the middle of the night to buy my liquor and the only place open would be the mall."

PETER

[illegible]

Why did she have to say that part about the twelve-year-old girls?

Peter jammed his hands into his pockets as he walked down Sixth Avenue. He knew she threw those things around just to hurt him. She had to let him know she was going to do whatever she wanted no matter how it made him feel. Fuck her. He could have affairs too, he just didn't. There was that actress in *The Blacks*, Sandra King. He could have had an affair with her. Her skin tone was perfect for stage light. She had a smooth deep tan, like fine leather. He hadn't lit many black casts before and he couldn't stop looking at her in the light. Her hair was straightened, which was not the style in those days. She wore it back, showing off a hairline that was a designer's dream, the way the Mexican shoreline looks from an airplane. It framed her face perfectly. Kate was still painting scenery then, and she often got fed up easily and left early while Peter stayed working late. San-

But she just laughed. The expression on her face was so blank and frightening that he grabbed onto his balls and rocked back and forth, back and forth, holding on to a towline to safety.

[illegible]

The double feature that day was *The Damned* and *The Night Porter*, so that attracted all the Nazi freaks and so-called decadent types plus a lot of masturbators and some film students. Every once in a while a thin nervous man would approach the window and not ask for a ticket. He would not reach for his wallet.

Kate reappeared at quitting time and witnessed the final three drop-offs with great interest. She flipped through the papers as they walked along.

"These are all eviction notices," she said.

"I thought so."

"They're all from my new landlord."

"Who's that?"

“New York Realty. It’s a Horne subsidiary, I think. See, it says right here that his company is the plaintiff . . . on every one of these cases. I just got the announcement two weeks ago that he had purchased my building, but I didn’t get any eviction notice. Look, these three slips are all from my address.”

“Do you know them?” Molly asked looking over Kate’s arm. “There might even be more than these. I think there are three or four other people collecting today.”

“Who are these tenants?” Kate asked, still thumbing through the yellow slips. “Pablo Guzman. That must be the Latin guy in apartment twelve with a diamond stud in his ear. And number five?”

“Isn’t that the young guy with the punk haircut who wears sunglasses at night?”

"Maybe. And number three, O'Rourke. I've often wondered about him actually. He used to go out every evening quite late and come back three hours later. I could hear him locking and unlocking his door. Not recently though."

"I hope not. Cruising is no longer cool, I think. Who knows, actually. Anyway, it looks like all the gay men in your building are being evicted. Does it list the charges?"

"Pets. They're all being thrown out for having pets."

"Like dogs and cats?"

“Yes, it looks like every other gay man in the neighborhood is being evicted. How do they know who’s who?”

"Well, we'll find out tonight," Molly said, moving in under Kate's arm. They kissed.

"Spare change?"

They stopped and both reached into their pockets.

"Hi, how are you?"

“Miserable. It’s too cold. This is hard, very hard.”

“You see that guy over there in the red hat?” she said to a Polish waitress with no green card. “Let him order five dollars’ worth of food and here’s a dollar for you.”

“Who’s that?” Kate asked.

“He used to be my friend but now he’s on the street. I can’t let him in my house or he’ll steal everything and never leave.”

They kissed again and were stopped again. They each gave over the last of their change.

“Here we are trying to have a run-of-the-mill illicit lesbian love affair,” Molly said. “And all around us people are dying and asking for money.”

“It is absurd to see people suffering every day.”

“And to be so untouched personally,” Molly said. “That’s the really scary part.”

“What do you mean untouched? We see this constantly.”

“Okay, Kate, but our city is so stratified that people can occupy the same physical space and never confront one another. New York is a death camp for thousands of people, but they don’t have to be contained for us to avoid them. The same streets I have fun on are someone else’s hell.”

“Well, more and more artists are doing work about AIDS. There were shows at the Whitney, the New Museum, MOMA, DIA . . . more than I can list.”

“So what does that do?”

“Molly, artwork is very political. It teaches people to see things in a new way. My artwork is my political work. Form is content. New forms are revolutionary.”

"I don't think you would be satisfied with that explanation if it was happening to you."

"It could happen to me," Kate said. "It could happen to you."

"I'm not going to get AIDS," Molly said.

“Yeah, but you could be homeless. What if your building burned down or went co-op?”

“I would have to leave New York, I guess. But I am white and know how to read so I can always get a job, even a boring one. There will always be McDonald’s.”

“What if you get sick?” Kate said. “I’m sure you don’t have any health insurance.”

"I don't know," Molly said. "I have a lot of friends."

“What about when you’re old?”

“Okay, you win. That’s when I’m really going to be in trouble. I forgot your point.”

“That it could be you or me, and if it was, my response would be the same. I’m an artist. That’s political. Form is content.”

"Okay." Molly was quiet.

Then Kate reached over and touched her, being conciliatory, now that Molly had given up.

“Molly?”

“Yeah?”

"I don't want to fight with you. I just want to kiss you."

When Kate put her arms around Molly on the street they became very obvious. They didn't disappear like she and Pearl did. They stood out. Anyone watching would have seen a peacock in a man's overcoat holding a significantly younger, more bewildered woman to her with some sense of passion.

"Let's check out the meeting," Molly said.

As they walked along the crowded sidewalk Molly could see that there were tiny jewels and particular human treasures in different spots along the way, but each one was surrounded by something very difficult and fearful. At the same time that Molly so clearly saw this decorating her path she also felt privately satisfied, having just been kissed and on her way to a destination. Her inside was safe, her outside was endangered. Why was she so protected?

"Why are we so protected?"

"I'm not protected," Kate said. "I'm a poor artist. I am not a powerful person in this society. Don't be so self-deprecating, it's unbearably righteous."

"You're not poor. Neither am I."

"Listen, Molly, when I was your age I was a lot more radical than you are, so don't lay that on me. That's your trip."

"Let's go to the meeting," Molly said. "Let's go there now."

KATE

James and Scott lived in two adjacent apartments on the ground floor of Kate's building. They had broken into the basement and built a large comfortable room that was a cross between a meeting hall for the Kiwanis Club and an underground bunker.

When Kate and Molly walked up, two men were standing guard duty outside the cellar door entrance, posing nonchalantly, watching for trouble. No one knew how to stand around nonchalantly better than gay men. Almost three hundred people were packed into the windowless space. They lined the walls crammed together on every available inch. Seats were reserved only for the most seriously ill and Kate saw a few young men in various stages of the disease. She also saw many faces she had noticed daily in her neighborhood for years but had never interacted with socially. The majority of the crowd, however, did seem robust and energetic. Fresh juice and extra blankets were available and passed along in a calm manner. In fact, permeating everything

like *subito piano* in music; the quiet after a crescendo, like falling off a cliff.

Men's voices filled the room. Some had constructive ideas. Some just wanted to talk. Some had bad suggestions or feeble ones like "Let's call a lawyer." But almost everyone wanted a chance to speak.

“I say an eye for an eye,” called out Cardinal Spellman, a short, bald man with a tiny mustache. “Let’s take away his house.”

"I have a better idea," called out Bob. "Let's take away his Castle."

That was the spark that united the anger and brought a relatively quiet room to life. No one can ever be as angry when it's hopeless as they can be when there's something to be done about it. People work for change when they think there's a chance of getting it. Otherwise they say, "Why bother?"

Ronald Horne's Castle was the biggest, lushest, most ostentatious and expensive hotel from the Eastern Seaboard to Rodeo Drive. And it was located right in the middle of midtown redevelopment, so the guests could have a clear view of their power and riches at work. It was renowned, not only for its lavishness, but also for the transplanted tropical rain forest that had been re-created inside the lobby to serve as a symbolic moat with actual crocodiles. The guests could feel like authentic aristocracy instead of the robber barons that they really were. From the moment they checked in they were treated like royalty from the middle ages. The motif was Early Modern Colonialism and the staff was required to dress in loincloths with chains hanging from their wrists and ankles. The men's room didn't say Men on the door. It said Bwana. The bathrooms were designed to look like diamond mines with black attendants wearing lanterns and pulling paper towels out with pickaxes. Chicken salad on rye cost twelve dollars.

“We should go now,” James said. “We’re angry now, so we should go now.”

“But how are we going to get cabs for three hundred?” asked a clean-shaven young man in a black leather jacket, who looked like he had a lot of discretionary income.

[illegible]

Peter walked down Second Avenue past endless rows of people selling their stuff on the street. Over the years the quality of goods had diminished. Kate mentioned seeing some good stuff late at night on the way back from the studio, but all he saw was junk. There were so many sellers out even at this hour, mostly

standing around trying to keep warm. The lucky ones were drinking pints of wine.

Maybe he'd find a woman at a bar who was lonely too. Maybe he'd stumble home with whiskey on his breath and tell Kate he had been working late. The thought almost made him cry. But by the time he sat down at the bar with a drink in his hand, both of these scenarios seemed equally unlikely. Not knowing what else to do now that he had actually bought the drink, he slouched over the wooden bar and looked at the TV.

"You want to buy a gold chain?" some guy breathed down his neck. "Fourteen-karat."

"No thanks," Peter mumbled, slumping even further.

On TV there was a man talking. If he didn't pay close attention to the precise words Peter would have no idea of what he was trying to communicate because the man had no facial expressions and modulated all phrases with an absolutely identical cadence.

"Who's that?" he asked the bartender, a short Polish guy smoking Barclay's. "Is that the president?"

"Nah," the guy said, sucking as hard as he could on the cig, trying to get more flavor than it had to give. "That's the anchor-man."

Mr. Anchor had a maudlin yellow glow over his skin, which was made of wax.

"Since when is there TV news on at one thirty in the morning?" Peter asked, trying to establish some kind of camaraderie with the bartender, who kept resisting.

"It's cable, buddy. Where have you been? They got news twenty-four hours a day now. They got a whole station that plays nothing but sports and one only for stocks and one only for music videos. You don't have to switch channels anymore, looking for what you want. Now you know what is where all night long."

"TV is so shocking," said Peter, "when you don't watch it for a while. Why would anyone want to believe a guy who looks like that? He's in terrible shape and he's got on too much pancake. Look at him. His skin is the texture of stale dough."

The commercials were more impressive, however. They were actually well done.

“Tell us, sir,” said the persistently plastic reporter, “who is going to pay for all this damage?”

“The hotel was built on tax rebates,” James said through a huge grin. In the background Peter could see crowds of gay men laughing, dancing and popping champagne corks. “We’ve already paid.”

The camera went back to the crowd. It looked like the Mets' locker room after they won the World Series. Men were in varying states of revelry, sharing drinks at the bar, singing show tunes in the piano lounge, watching old movies on the huge video screen, conversing intensely in the smoking room. And they were all snacking on caviar and smoked oysters.

"Oh, no," said Peter out loud, unable to control himself.

“What’s the matter now, asshole?” yelled the gay man at the bar. “I’ve had it with you heteros. You don’t care about anyone but yourselves.”

“No, it’s not you,” Peter said, barely able to get out the words. “It’s my wife.”

“What do you mean?” asked the bartender, whose interest had been piqued. “There’s all guys there.”

"No, that's her. The redhead with the crew cut in a suit and tie. That's my wife."

“This is some world,” said the bartender. “But you gotta live and let live. Fucking faggots.”

There she was. You couldn't miss her. That orange hair looked more mandarin on the eerie color TV. She was in earnest conversation with a tall man brushing out a silver mane of hair and braiding it into pigtails.

“ ‘Nother round?” the bartender asked and poured it without waiting for confirmation.

“You may ask,” resumed the reporter in the classic frontal electronic journalism pose, staring sincerely at his public, “where are the police? Well, according to Chief of Command Ed Ramsey of Manhattan South, his officers are not properly equipped to come into contact with large numbers of AIDS victims.”

“Not victim, you breeder,” screamed the gay man at the bar, who clearly couldn’t take it anymore. “*People with AIDS* is the

A horizontal line composed of many small, identical triangles pointing upwards, arranged side-by-side.

Molly and Fabian spent the whole night listening to the radio. Once BAI announced their number as control central they started fielding calls from all corners. Mostly it was gay people from the five boroughs wanting subway directions and asking for updates.

There appeared to be a standoff for a while when the cops couldn't get their rubbers, but finally Overseer Smith personally commissioned three slaves to run out to a number of all-night drugstores and buy fifty pairs of Playtex Living Gloves, which turned out to be an unfortunate lemon yellow. It made the overweight cops look sillier than necessary, reported Bob from a pay phone in the lobby.

“They resemble advertisements for dishwashing soap, or more appropriately, ducks.”

The demonstrators, being in top form, took immediate advantage of this new situation by chanting “Your gloves don’t

it, all muscle and sinew, grunting and sweating, climbing across her body. When they were lying quietly in their own sweat, Kate pointed out Molly's window.

“The sun is coming up and there are birds everywhere. How unusual.”

A decorative horizontal border consisting of a repeating pattern of small triangles.

One morning Peter and Kate lay in bed for a long time. He rubbed her feet and cleaned out her toenails before clipping them. He oiled her legs and breasts until she smelled like a baby and then he rubbed her shoulders and the back of her neck. Then they made love. It was all physical. No talking. He made her a cup of coffee and held her closely under his arm and next to his body as they walked to her studio in the spring rain.

"You're so sweet," she said. "To take such good care of me."

They talked about painting the living room and which color would be the best, which store would be the best to buy it from and which day of the week would be the best to get the job done. They discussed a new restaurant that had opened on the block and each gave their opinion of the decor. Peter mentioned an article he had read in *New German Critique* and Kate told about an exhibit at PPOW Gallery she had dropped in on accidentally while trying to find something else. It was the murmurings and

ceiling was too low, but it was only those fiberglass panels which were easily removable, but what a mess.

"Hello, Peter."

He looked up. It was Robert, that young intern from Yale.

"I'm working with you again," he said unflappably. "I've been hired on to this project."

Then he swung that same briefcase up on the tabletop and popped open the steel clasps with a snap.

Same moves, Peter noticed. But with a different kind of edge this time. Maybe his girlfriend finally broke up with him.

“Nice to see you, Robert. We are going to have a fun project ahead of us here. A complicated one. This is city light, not natural light and so every source is a human invention and decision complicated by circumstance. We have to justify all the placements and intensities with the story of the man who installed them that way. You’ll see. We’ll have fun. How many fluorescent lights are in how many offices? How many of those are blinking, or simply out? How many drivers are on the interstate that cuts through town? How many turned on their brights?”

“Good,” Robert said, flatly, soberly distracted. “I’m ready to work.” Then he held out his hand to Peter, offering him a formal handshake.

What's this? Peter thought, but took hold for no reason. Then the young man seemed to crumple in Peter's hand, beginning with the wrist and losing power systematically like an inflatable skeleton.

"I'm sorry," Robert said, not wiping his tears on the sleeve of his jacket, but instead producing a perfectly folded, white, ironed handkerchief in which he blew his nose. Then he stopped crying by pressing his thumb and forefinger against the ridge of his nose and shutting his eyes so tightly that no water could seep out.

"My father's lover died yesterday."

“Oh,” Peter said, very uncomfortable. Then he said, “I’m sorry.”

“Let’s get to work,” Robert said, regaining full composure. He took off his suit jacket, hung it carefully over the back of his chair and folded up his sleeves. “It’s the best way to feel better.”

furious. Something in what Robert had said reminded him of his loneliness. It reminded him of his helplessness. It told him he was alone. He was sad. He had no friends and no one to take care of him. He had no one to take care of him because he had been abandoned. He was abandoned and overprotected. He was given everything and nothing. It had ruined him. It had made him awkward. Now he was vulnerable as a result. He was lost. He was a lost boy who could not cry. He was hurt and soft. He was soft like a woman but he was not a woman. A woman left you when you were down. She had an affair when you were vulnerable. If he had not been vulnerable he would have had an affair too, but he was so he couldn't.

"Are you all right?" Robert asked, trying not to look worried. "Do you need to take a walk outside in the air?"

"You know, Robert," Peter said. "It's not as easy to be a man as it once was. Actually it never was easy and now it's worse than before. People blame you for everything. But all along you have to keep your perspective. You have to keep your balance."

Peter stood up and took a deep breath. He stretched out his muscular arms and touched his toes. He was in good shape.

"This is New York City," he said. "The best thing is to focus on the big picture. Just take the long view and don't get dragged down in temporary details. Do you see what I mean?"

"No," Robert said. "I don't see it that way at all."

PETER

[illegible]

It was clearly spring but there were still knives in the air when the rain came down too strong and cold and the wind whipped too fast. Peter felt the rain beating against his waterproof coat. He was protected. The sky was silver like the coat and the buildings.

Heading downtown he passed a line of street people not being too rowdy. They were waiting to get into a soup kitchen set up by a local synagogue. He watched them closely. They were mostly black. They had survived the winter. Some seemed disoriented but he couldn't tell if they were homeless because they were confused, like the TV said, or if being homeless had driven them insane, which seemed a lot more likely. But they didn't all show very dramatic emotions. Some were just quietly down on their luck. A couple of the younger guys had a lot of energy and were either joking around or antagonizing one another. They danced by the older men who looked blank and rubbed huge

hands over their entire heads and faces like they were oh so tired. No one was properly dressed. The few women were mostly quite thin, some with babies or younger children. None of whom looked older than eight. The moms were skinny and some had that junkie/crackhead zombie look with sunken or distracted eyes and missing teeth. Peter figured that the ones who were better organized probably still had somewhere to stay but not enough food, so they had to stand out in the rain with their kids. But he didn't know for sure if that was true. There were also some traditional bag ladies who were overweight and wearing and carrying a lot of stuff. They spoke loudly and had a lot to say. The skinny ones just tried to keep their kids quiet.

When he started looking at these people, Peter felt a deep, deep compassion. It drew him closer to them, this sense of injustice that they had been treated so badly. He crossed the street and was practically next to them, watching everyone file inside. Then he followed. Once through the door Peter discovered that these people had been waiting for soup and coffee and cheese and peanut butter and jelly on white bread sandwiches. Then he saw a whole table of elderly people, mostly white and black with two Chinese couples. They kept away from the drug addicts and winos and bag ladies and down-on-their-luck men. The elderly people liked to eat quietly and slowly. The other people ate fast, then sat back and stared.

Peter stood against the back wall watching everything. He was the only one in the room with rain boots. He was the only blond. People drank their coffee very slowly out of Styrofoam cups, like they knew how to make a cup of coffee last an afternoon. That way it didn't matter how quickly they ate their sandwiches. The smell in the room was overpoweringly bad. But it wasn't the room itself, it was the people in it. The warmer the room became, the more he could smell rotting flesh and urine.

When the meal was over, another group of people came into the room. They were all white, mostly aging, but well cared-for. The men wore a relaxed collection of suits while the women had black skirts of all styles with a variety of nice blouses. They lined up in three rows at the front of the room and a young gay rabbi spoke into the microphone.

that some of the old people felt his pleasure vicariously. It made them remember something about their own songs which seemed very important right then.

Peter stood there this whole time, rain dripping from his raincoat. Everyone else's clothes were soaked through, but his were dry.

How can you relieve suffering for even one moment? he thought. Here we are, the homeless, the old, the artists. The sadness is so overwhelming I can't imagine what to do. Nothing in my life has prepared me for this.

[illegible]

It was really pouring and Peter wore his boots and raincoat and carried an umbrella. He liked to be well protected from the weather. He didn't like to get wet and it was easy to stay dry if you just took the time to put on all the necessary accessories. In New Hampshire, when it snowed, the ground reflected the moonlight and everything was clearly illuminated, even without stars. Sometimes in the day it was so bright, it hurt your eyes. But Peter could start at the top of the hill and roll down the whole way without getting hurt because the snow was so deep and soft and people knew how to dress warmly up there.

Peter turned and saw a tall wiry black man wearing a ski

“Yeah.”

They almost ran to that one, both of them sweating in the damp, wet night. They raced right up to the front door before accepting that it was locked.

“Let me ask that cop,” Peter said, wondering exactly what he had gotten himself into.

“No, no cops,” the man said, grabbing the paper out of Peter’s hand.

“Okay,” Peter said. His head was swimming. He felt trapped, like an outlaw. What should he do? Should he call a cab to take them to an all-night pharmacy? Should he just give the guy ten bucks? It was getting very late. Was this all a scam to get ten bucks out of him? Then he looked up and saw Molly walking down the street. She wasn’t wearing a raincoat. She didn’t have on boots or a rain hat or an umbrella. She wore her jacket collar up and hunched her shoulders against the rain.

“Molly.”

She looked up, acknowledged him, but definitely kept on walking.

“Molly, help me, will you?”

She stopped then and stepped in under his umbrella so that they were very close. The guy was standing under the awning of a deli, looking both ways at all times.

“What’s the matter, Peter?”

“This guy stopped me. He needs to get a prescription filled but all the pharmacies are closed and I’m not sure of what to do. Do you know of an open pharmacy?”

She looked at the prescription.

“Tylenol Three. That’s a painkiller. It has codeine.”

"Oh," he said.

Then she walked over to the guy standing under the awning.

“Do you need a painkiller?”

"Yes I do."

“How much does it hurt?”

“It hurts. It aches. It’s sore. I need to stop the pain.”

“Then what are you going to do?” she asked him, not sympathetically, but with a challenge in her voice, like she expected to hear the correct answer to that question.

“Are you willing to take the full oath of allegiance to the United States of America?” asked the authoritative male voice with a mid-Atlantic accent, speaking on tape. He had no intonation.

“Yes,” said the woman automatically, rolling chopped meat into dumpling dough. Her teenage daughter was chewing on the edge of a pencil, going back and forth from her calculator to her notebook at one of the empty tables.

“Are you willing to bear arms for the United States?”

KATE

The first car they stepped into had homeless people stretched out on the benches and in all four corners. They moved into the second car.

“You know,” Kate said, putting her arm around Molly in the little double seat by the sliding doors, “the main thing that I have learned from being with you is that I am a growing, changing person. But I don’t really understand your politics. Don’t try to explain them again either. There’s just something I absolutely

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head furiously and sliding his hands down his pants for comfort.

“That night we were sleeping and at five in the morning they tried to kick in the door. They climbed up the trellis and tried to climb in through the windows. And all along I thought, we can’t scream for help because we were two naked women in one bed. So we lay there absolutely silent, holding each other’s hands, and eventually they went away laughing. I know that the owner heard the commotion. I mean, they could hear Pearl’s orgasms, surely they heard these guys trying to gang-rape us. But no one came to help. The next morning when we checked out the desk clerk didn’t say a word.”

Why is she always telling me these stories about how awful men are? Kate thought. She's trying to make me feel guilty for having a man. She's manipulating me. I hate when she talks like this.

“You’ll see,” Molly said, settling back down against her lover’s shoulder. “Someday if we travel together, it’s really different. Everywhere you go men come over and talk to you. They always interrupt. They always want your attention.”

A couple of cops strode into the car in their blues, swinging sticks skillfully on their leather straps. Then they hit the sticks into their hands, the way girls on a softball team throw the ball into their own mitts. The slap is the thing.

“Move on,” one cop said, hitting the guy on the wrapped bottoms of his feet.

“Where to?” the guy said, rolling over and closing his eyes.

"I'm coming back in ten minutes," the cop said. "Don't be here."

Then he and his partner sauntered out again. The guy took one last look and then rolled over and went back to sleep.

“If he’s planning on hitting the soles of every sleeping person in the next car it’s going to take him more than ten minutes to get back to this one,” Molly whispered.

But Kate had other things on her mind.

“Molly, why don’t you get yourself a second girlfriend? If you had a regular girlfriend you wouldn’t be so dependent on me. You really want a lesbian and I’ll never be a lesbian. I like cock.”

A decorative horizontal separator consisting of a continuous series of small, upward-pointing triangles.

She was of two minds about going out of town. Frankly, Kate wanted to get away from her lovers, and she wanted to sit down with the carpenter and work intensively on her project. But there was also some nagging suspicion that this was the kind of moment best not left unattended and anything was capable of happening behind her back. So she had called Pearl the night before to go over their agenda and realized, again, that she really did need to go up there and see the wooden framing structure for herself. She could not risk arriving at the library site on the morning of the installation to find something wrong with the frames.

It was a strange bus ride. Kate exhausted all her normal traveling rituals with a speedy ambivalence. She ate her food before Yankee Stadium, lifelessly leafed through and then dismissed her newspaper and once again carefully considered the pros and cons of owning a Walkman. It came in handy at times

like these, but didn't one's sense of humanity demand striking up a conversation with one's neighbor instead of plugging into a square plastic box? Kate looked at the man sitting next to her. He was listening to his Walkman. When she closed her eyes and pressed back into her seat she could feel vaguely operatic vibrations emanating from his head and passing through the cushions.

Again she looked for distractions, but the bumpy road made reading or sketching impossible. Besides, there was a large, flat calm where her general anxiety really should have been, and then on top of it a tiny, nervous, constant throb.

But she did feel instinctively good about Pearl. That was one thing about Molly's friends. They were reliable and very cheap. Of course, men were helping too. After all it was Spiros who had gotten her the funding and he good-naturedly promised to organize champagne and hors d'oeuvres for the actual opening.

“Although I’m not a great believer in installations,” he told her, “I am even more atheistic when it comes to sour grapes.”

The bus ride had been interesting for the first thirty minutes when they passed through an extended Harlem that was a collection of churches, beauty parlors and liquor stores. It had main drags, it had decimated areas, it had music schools and a liberation bookstore. It had Jamaican meat patties and a good crust pie between the projects and luxury brownstones. It had everything a poor city had plus certain things that only Harlem had and it was black and Latin all over except around the edges and a few pockets of new white people moving in or old white people who had endured or brand-new Korean businesses. After Harlem there was nothing to look at for hours.

It was Thursday. On Tuesday night Justice had met for the first time in its new home. The membership had simply grown too large for anybody's basement. Now they gathered in the abandoned Saint Mark's bathhouse, closed down by the mayor right after he closed the Mineshaft. The crowd was huge, especially since Justice had been joined by Fury, the women-with-AIDS group. Now Daisy, an older Puerto Rican woman with long gray hair, co-facilitated the meetings with James. She began every session with a big smile on her face and an announcement.

tifice. They chatted a bit about books, then movies, but the moment between them had dissolved.

It was our gayness that connected us, she realized later. Not our love of men. It is the danger that brings you together, makes you need each other and feel so close.

KATE

Kate leaned against the wall of the small bus station next to the water fountain. She could see everything from that spot: who went into the bathroom and how long it took them to come out. She could tell who was smoking cigarettes and who was smoking pot. She could hear every telephone conversation.

Kate picked the chocolate coating off a candy bar with her teeth. It suddenly flashed in her mind that her relationship with Peter might not last forever. Her response was a tiny terror. She lost her cool. It had snuck up on her like a shadow, without any premeditation, and then passed with no imaginable picture.

One drizzling night she and Peter had come out of the subway and she'd spotted Molly walking ahead of them on the other side of the street.

"I think he meant space-aged in the Baudrillard sense of the word," Peter was saying. "As generically modern and techno-

Then there were the guys on the corner selling raffles to “help stop drug abuse.” Peter wanted to stop drug abuse but he couldn’t be sure that this was the most effective way. So he had to say no. Then the kids selling got really frustrated and screamed out after him, “What’s the matter, you like drug abuse?” So he knew immediately that he had made the right decision.

Peter was glad that Kate was out of his hair for a few days. She was really annoying him. If she wanted more independence, let her have it. He felt like having a few days in Manhattan on his own. He felt like a sailor. He could go anywhere he wanted

“We met bowling. Remember? I had a copy of *Mourning Becomes Electra*.”

Oh thank God, thought Peter. He could have gotten down on his knees and reached up from his heart to heaven. *Thank you for bringing this woman to me.*

When Shelley agreed to go have a cup of coffee after work, he knew how much he really needed this. And he knew that he could really like her too. She was beautiful and New York sexy, ethnic. He could learn to love her. She would grow up soon. She'd be terrific at thirty.

“Do you want to go to heaven?” he asked, sitting across the table.

"No," she said.

“You mean to tell me that when you die you don’t want to go to heaven?”

“Oh, when I die, yeah. I thought you were going now.”

She's smart, he thought. She's funny.

When they made love for the first time that day it wasn't passionate love. It was cool. But he knew the passion would come. There was already an immediate tenderness and easy familiarity. Shelley pulled at his penis like it was a fun new toy. He loved when women played with his dick. Engagement or absentmindedness were both sexy in their own ways.

“It always surprises me how big balls are,” she said. “The way that everyone talks about pricks all the time you’d never know that balls were anything in this world. Except for gay men. They like balls. They call them ‘baskets’ or maybe that’s with a dick too, but they like them ‘low-slung.’ ”

“How do you know?” he said, worried for a minute. “You’re not gay, are you? You’re not bi or unsure or in transition? You’re heterosexual, right? You choose cock.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, a little unnerved. “My brother is gay. We talk about that stuff all the time.”

“Well, I need a break from it,” he said, taking her in his arms. “So let’s not talk about it when we’re together, okay?”

“Sure,” she said and then she thought it over a bit. “Sure, why not?”

She had just dropped out of her senior year at NYU which

made her plenty young. Young enough that Peter didn't even ask.

Later she asked him, “What makes a man a good lover?”

And he said, "Take your time. Make sure she gets enough clit. Touch everything."

Who was the person he had become that afternoon? Peter had never seen himself so romantic and funny. Well, not never, of course, but seriously not for a long, long time.

They walked out together that night, along the edge of Chinatown where they could smell the bok choy cooking out of every window. They could smell the leftover fish in the garbage and see people taking an easy smoke for the first time all day. Peter had a new woman's hand in his and it was softer, warmer and a completely different shape.

There was a cop car parked on Canal and Mott. There's always a lot more crime in the summer, people get sweaty and crowded together. They get bored and want new things in their lives. They get angry very fast.

“Let’s check it out,” Shelley said, so they joined the pack watching from stoops and street corners, leaning on doorframes and the trunk of the patrol car.

“If you look at the light,” he told her, “you can’t see the light. You have to look at its effect on objects. The whirling white and red on top of a police car is meaningless without the faces it stripes. Without them it is only an appliance. We have to explore each object beyond its functional identity.”

She hooked her fingers in the back belt loop of his pants.

“You know, Peter,” she said, rubbing her palm against his stomach as they stood watching, “it must be very lonely for you because you think you’re the only one watching. But that’s not true. I’m watching you, Peter. I see you.”

Has any man ever been that happy?

[illegible]

Thursday night after work Molly stopped by Daisy's place with a six-pack plus a couple of extra beers. The double feature that day had been *Persona* and *Cries and Whispers*, two proto-lesbian classics, but one really had to be in the mood.

On the way over, she ran into Charlie who was, as usual, looking hungry and wanting to get high. Usually getting high was the priority, but every once in a while he had to take time out from selling nickel bags on the corner so that he could quickly eat.

"I don't mind feeding him," Molly had told Kate once. "Because everyone needs to eat."

But that did not erase the fact that he brought in three times as much money a week as she did, but still managed to be homeless because it all went to drugs. That's why she got pissed off when, once in a blue moon, he would try to guilt-trip her for having a home when he didn't. She also knew that while drug

The fact was after all these apprehensions that Charlie was really okay and if drugs hadn't taken over his entire life, they could have stayed friends.

Molly hated when Charlie ran this rap. He'd be an armchair radical if he had an armchair.

She felt bad the minute she'd said it, though, because he looked humiliated, which made her acknowledge that they weren't equals since he was dependent on her for food. Therefore he couldn't tell her to go fuck herself because he wanted to eat. So she just paid the check and split.

First there was Daisy, a combination aging Latin hippie and

Then Trudy turned up the radio.

[illegible]

"No, I live right here. A few blocks over. I was just in Oklahoma for vacation."

"I never really thought of it as a tourist spot," Molly said. The street was wet because it had been raining, which meant that all the headlights reflected off the asphalt and there was a special sound from the tires on the water.

“Sometimes I need to go somewhere else,” Sam said as they walked along. “Sometimes it’s desert or just flat.”

At one point that evening, right after the last envelope had been stuffed and stamped, Molly and Trudy and Sam had gone into the bathroom to smoke cigarettes because Daisy felt that a sick woman should not have to put up with cigarette smoke wafting through her apartment. Normally Molly didn't smoke, but after all that beer, she just felt like it. She just felt like being a normal New Yorker with no pretensions. The lamp was busted

"I love her."

“How do lesbians keep from giving each other AIDS?” Sam asked, stroking everything.

"Don't eat her when she has her period if you're not sure. That's all. It's easy. Do you think you might have AIDS?"

“No,” Sam said. “I used to live with someone who had it though.”

"Did you have sex?"

"No."

“Share needles?”

Sam nodded.

“Be careful then.”

“I’d really like some coffee and pie,” Sam said.

“What’s out there at three o’clock on Friday morning?”

They ran down the list. There were chicken tostadas. There were late after-hours places, Puerto Rican social clubs and black-leather rich artists' bars. There were always twenty-four-hour Korean markets but no coffee and pie this side of the Hudson River that time of night.

"What about the Kiev?"

“No, I want the real thing, not that canned filling stuff,” Sam said. “Let’s just lie here and talk about pie.”

Molly admired Sam's hands, which were cracked and swollen from working so hard in so many strange places. She ignored the tracks.

“Well,” Molly said. “There’s three-berry pie at Café Yaffa. There’s Danish apple torte at Hiro’s. There’s pear-cranberry at Orlin. There’s brandy walnut—”

“That’s yuppie food,” Sam said. “I want strawberry-rhubarb. The kind they sell in truck stops once you get out of Ohio. The kind you can always order anywhere in America and know it’s going to be good.”

"Is it still like that out there in America?" Molly asked. "I haven't been in so long it's hard to know."

“Somewhere out there is strawberry-rhubarb pie,” Sam said. “And I want a piece.”

In the morning Sam made them both coffee and then she turned on the TV.

KATE

[illegible]

Pearl drove up in her truck and opened the door.

“Welcome to the country.”

The truck made too much noise, so they rode together in a kind of friendly, necessary silence accompanied by mechanical squeals and groans, like an old mule hauling them up these American hills. There are not too many places left with mountainsides and here and there between the corn, a horse, a white one that looks right at you in your passing car and flares its nostrils.

“Oh, no, I’m thinking like a postcard,” Kate yelled.

“That’s what happens,” Pearl answered. “Or some pastoral movie. I could turn on the radio for soundtrack. The only stations we get up here are country music or God.”

"That's okay," Kate shouted over the rattling motor. "I'm happy."

They decided to go back to Pearl's place and relax, then

"I like to watch TV in the morning," she said. "What's on?"

She pulled out a crinkled Sunday section from under the bed and started reading it with great seriousness.

"Oh, this looks good. 'Senator's daughter gets kidnapped. With Linda Blair.' "

"Can I tell you something?" Molly said, feeling like she was going to cry. Feeling so sad. "I have been waiting for two years to sit with my lover around a table with her friends and family, like I sat with you at Daisy's. For two years I have not been able to sleep in my lover's bed and say what I feel like saying or linger in the morning with someone to hold on to or watch TV with. Thank you."

"I'll be thinking of you," Sam said.

if she went someplace on her own he'd never been before? What then? He never said what he wanted, he just looked unhappy and moped. Then she had to take care of him. There was nothing wrong with that, he would take care of her if she were in his shoes. He did the shopping sometimes when she told him what to get. He never cheated.

Then a graceful woman came slowly into the kitchen.

“Hi, I’m Becky. I just wanted to get some water.”

"Hello," Kate said. "No problem, I'm finished in here."

She went back into the main room to sit with the two women for a while.

Becky and Pearl were quite lovely together, Kate had to admit, even though she disliked Pearl. Actually, she despised her. Pearl was in a ghetto. She was a man-hater. Still, Kate could aesthetically appreciate such luxurious hair and their glowing objective loveliness. Kate was universal and so she could enjoy and appreciate all forms of beauty and did so until they excused themselves to rush off to bed. From her chair Kate could hear them giggle and whisper and moan slightly. She missed Molly. She missed talking to her. She missed touching her. She heard the two women making love and thought about when she and Molly made love and could not accept that it was the same thing.

No matter how much I think about it or hear about it, no matter how much pain it causes me or how exciting it can be, it has not become acceptable for me. It is not regular.

The next morning she got up very early filled with energy and didn't know what to do with it. She went out and came back to sounds of Pearl and Becky making love again. She waited, static, until Pearl woke, dressed, ate and was ready to go to work.

They went out in back behind the work shed, where Pearl was storing the frames under large tarps. After hauling each one out and positioning it, Pearl began putting hinges on each piece and worked steadily while Kate spread out a sheet and sat on the grass. The woman Kate was watching at work had been an intoxicated lover the night before. But now Pearl was acting as though nothing had happened. Why wasn't she howling and dancing? That made Kate think how grown-up Pearl must be. Right then Kate established a definition of an adult as someone

[illegible]

There was no way that Molly could possibly sleep. The night was vibrating for her like a personalized set of Magic Fingers in a desolate hotel somewhere outside of Reno. She had been living in a box of closed possibilities and then it occurred to her quite suddenly that she did deserve love after all.

She put on her shoes, straightened out her place, made the bed, washed the glasses. She took out the garbage and stuffed it in the gray steel cans sitting on the street. But first Molly sorted out the bottles into separate bags and carefully laid them on the hood of a parked car so some homeless person could cash them in. That would make a nice after-midnight surprise for someone out of luck. Just when they were too tired to look through one more garbage bag there'd be enough bottles suddenly for a beer and two cigarettes. Most people throw their bottles out with the rest of the trash so bag pickers have to put their hands in rotting repulsive refuse for the five-cent deposit.

MOLLY

A decorative horizontal line consisting of approximately 60 small, black-outlined triangles pointing upwards, arranged in a continuous row.

"I can't," Molly said, rolling over Sam's flesh to get to her clothes. "It's credit card day."

“It’s Justice. Justice strikes today. How come you never come to meetings? Doesn’t Trudy tell you what’s going on?”

“Thousands of people are dropping dead and no one cares. People won’t do anything until it affects them. That’s what’s going on, Sam.”

"Yeah," Molly said. "But it's real."

Molly looked at Sam's green eyes, the way they twinkled. She looked at iron muscles and little pieces of flesh.

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“It’s a rite of passage. People who may be HIV positive inevitably offer you a drink out of their glass. It’s a test of loyalty to see if you’re prejudiced or not, to see if you are informed enough to know that you can’t get it that way.”

“That roommate I told you about?” Sam said. “The one who died?”

"Yeah."

“He shit all over himself and I had to clean it up. He was too sick to move so he had to lie in it until I got home.”

Molly put her arm around Sam and buried her face in her neck.

"Sam, are you afraid?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know what I feel."

[illegible]

“Maybe I can get you a job on a new production. That would be more fun than working at a Xerox store, don’t you think? You can be an electrician.”

"It's easy. I'll teach you. I'll teach you in a week."

I could make her life so much more exciting, he thought. I

[illegible]

Justice had gotten too large for the bathhouse, so they crashed the Saint, a three-story nightclub, former gay bar extraordinaire that used to be the Filmore East that used to be a Loew's and was about to become a Cineplex triplex complex where anyone could see three bad movies for the price of four. Three generations of underground people had had extreme experiences in that building.

When Justice stormed in, they disrupted a power networking party organized by the Business Association of Single Traders and Retail Distributors of Saccharine. The sight of over one thousand passionate pederasts and sodomites in black T-shirts and the word *Justice* spray-painted over pink triangles encouraged most of the BASTARDS to leave by the fire exits. The management didn't care who was in the place as long as they bought drinks. Justice poured into the third-story dance floor, filled the gray-carpeted balconies which were the site of a quarter of a

A decorative horizontal border at the bottom of the page, composed of a continuous row of small, stylized triangle shapes.

During the four hours that Molly and Fabian sat, many events occurred. There were a number of street people sleeping, crying, with gangrene, with large infections, with snot covering their faces, with blood everywhere, unable to speak, unable to move, all unattended and with no place to go. There were a few gunshots brought in by the police. A man had been beaten up. His friend had one arm around him and another arm holding the stack of records that they had been on their way to spin. Mothers worried

[illegible]

ing he was a loved person in this world. That was the last thing he knew."

They left James at his front door and after Molly left a long composed letter in Kate's mailbox, she and Fabian walked on a little way together over to the West Side and down Christopher Street. They were pretty quiet except when Fabian stopped to buy an ice cream cone. It was another gay summer and they were in it. There were all those sexy guys prancing around. Some of them were sweet young things wearing practically nothing. Some of them were big hunks wearing practically nothing. The usual fag teenagers were hanging out by the water playing radios and lots of guys in bicycle pants were cruising around, being cute. A few straight women were walking around with their gay friends talking things over and one voyeuristic straight couple clung to each other desperately.

“This is where I first saw Scott,” Molly said. “It was about a year ago. He and James were handing out flyers for Justice. Scott had long hair then and a big Pepsodent smile. I remember I was mad at Kate for not being around. A year has passed. Not much has changed.”

"This is where I first met Scott too," Fabian said. "About six years ago at the Ramrod. He blew me on the pier."

"It's been a long year," Molly said. "A huge one. But nothing much has changed."

KATF

[illegible]

Scott died this morning. Life is very short. I can't waste mine waiting for you to love me enough. There's something missing in you. I don't think you know how to love. You just know how to hold on to people. It's not the same thing.

She heard the door to James's apartment start to open and she knew she didn't want to see him. Still holding the letter Kate stepped back quietly under the staircase and waited until he was out the front door. He was walking with a black woman Kate had never seen before and she only heard snippets of their conversation. She heard two things: "Why me?" and "I don't want to die."

She was sweating. She walked outside and noticed everything. The buses had been painted a new color. There was a new

She pressed her face into his chest. His shoulders were like guard rails. She was surrounded by him. She had no air.

"That girl means nothing to me," he said. "Nothing. You give up yours and I'll give up mine. Then we can be exactly like we were before."

She placed her fingers flat against his chest. It was a wall. It moved. There was hair underneath his shirt. She wanted to dig her fingernails in and tear him apart.

He spoke again. What did he say this time?

[illegible]

The New York Times obituary said that Scott was “survived” by two daughters, a wife, mother, father and sister in Kansas City. Then Kate found a privately placed notice at the bottom of the obituary page.

Scott Yarrow died in the arms of his lover, James Carroll, with whom he shared a vision of freedom for lesbians and gay men.

When she went to the site of the funeral, Kate discovered that it was the same church where she had watched Molly and Pearl months before. Now she too was a mourner. There were so many people it was impossible to even consider getting into the church. Once inside, what would they do there anyway? “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” had no place here. There was only fire. Kate looked closely at the crowd. There were some people she

turpentine. She watched her own hands turn black and her arms cake with dirt and blood surrounded by the moving spikes of pants legs bobbing around her. Dragging the cans and power lines to the base of the collage's wooden frames, she looked back at the chaos behind her. Each gesture was too large and so unusual that the action passed before her like a high-speed silent film. Only there was no silence.

[illegible]

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Channel Z News. I'm Roland Johnson.

And I'm Susie Fong.

Al Harber with sports.

And Doctor Casper Griffin with the weather.

All this and more when Channel Z continues after this message.

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[Commercial]

ROLAND

Good evening. In the news tonight, Ronald Horne murdered in Forty-second Street melee. Congress approves new Contra aid plan. Mayor goes to bat for the peanut butter bagel and Masters and Johnson warn heterosexuals: new threat from AIDS. But first, Susie?

SUSIE

Thank you, Roland. Real-estate mogul Ronald Horne met a fiery death today when a freak accident occurred during a riot by AIDS victims. An art installation designed for the inauguration of a new health club caught fire and enveloped the billionaire developer in a flaming collage. Police are still investigating the incident. We switch live to Sonny Harris on location in Bryant Park. Sonny?

SONNY

Thank you, Susie. Little remains of today's riot except for the scattered scraps of television equipment smashed by the angry mob. We are here with Chief of Command Ed Ramsey of Manhattan South. Chief, can you tell us what happened?

ED RAMSEY

At approximately two twelve this afternoon, a piece of art that had been placed in the park caught on fire. The artist has informed us that he was using polyurethane, a known flammable substance.

SONNY

Thank you, Chief Ramsey. Back to you, Roland.

ROLAND

Thanks, Sonny. Congress voted today to approve a multimillion-dollar aid package to rebel forces in Nicaragua. Frank Miller has details from Washington. Frank?

As soon as Molly caught sight of Kate's hair, she'd climbed up on a lamppost and kept her eyes pinned to that woman throughout the entire event. She'd seen Kate go under the stage and then come out again on the other side and watched her slip under the framing just as the first flames began to appear. Then Kate had come around to behind the police lines and watched the fire from across the street.

For a few weeks after the event Molly had vague thoughts of seeing Kate again but had never acted on it and eventually any desire toward her faded, naturally. She wasn't even provoked by curiosity as Kate developed a high profile as a result of Horne's death and could be read about in an essay by Gary Indiana in the *Village Voice* and one by Barbara Kruger in *ArtForum*. In fact, Kate began working extensively in burning installations and quickly got commissions from a number of Northern European countries to come start fires there. She had been in Amsterdam

[illegible]

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